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SUBJECT: CODEL FILNER VISIT TO THE PHILIPPINES

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. The week-long visit to Manila by Representative Bob Filner, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, underscored the close ties between the United States and the Philippines, and highlighted the care that the USG continues to provide for Philippine W.W.II Veterans who served with the U.S. military. The Congressman met with President Arroyo, Speaker Nograles, Under Secretary of National Defense Santos, and Zamboanga Mayor Lobregat. He presented VA benefit checks to several eligible Filipino W.W. II veterans, and visited the Philippine Veterans Memorial Medical Center, recipient of VA grant funds. He laid a wreath at the American Cemetery; met with American Studies students at a local University; traveled to Mindanao where he spent Thanksgiving Day with U.S. troops and visited a USAID project; received the Gusi International Peace Prize; and toured the historic island of Corregidor. Finally, he met many veterans and VA employees during his tours of the VA Manila facilities and received operational briefings on VA's progress implementing the new, one-time lump sum benefit for eligible Filipino W.W. II Veterans. Congressman Filner's visit successfully underlined the long-standing nature of the U.S.-Philippine partnership and our shared commitment to our veterans. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Representative Filner visited Manila November 21 to November 28, accompanied by Chief of Staff Mr. Tony Buckles, Professional Staff Member Ms. Jian Zapata and LCDR Ron Valencia. Rep. Filner represents the 51st congressional district of California, home to the largest percentage of Filipino-American citizens in the continental U.S. This was the Congressman's third visit to the Philippines and the first since the landmark Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation provision became law last February as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

President Arroyo

¶3. (U) During a November 23 call on President Arroyo, Rep. Filner reiterated the importance of the U.S.-Philippine relationship and the long history of partnership, with a shared commitment to our veterans.

¶4. (SBU) President Arroyo thanked Rep. Filner for his successful effort to secure additional benefits for an expanded group of Filipino and Filipino-American veterans. The Congressman and the President also discussed how the SAVE Act would benefit Philippine apparel exporters and U.S. textile producers; Philippine efforts toward qualifying for Millennium Challenge Corporation funding; the effort to secure peace in Mindanao before the end of the Arroyo administration; and immigration for Philippine nurses.

Speaker Nograles

¶5. (U) Rep. Filner called on House of Representatives Speaker Prospero Nograles November 23. Nograles, flanked by nearly a dozen Philippine legislators, thanked Congressman Filner for his efforts on behalf of Filipino veterans and presented the Congressman with a framed House resolution that, in recognition of his accomplishments, declared him an honorary citizen of the Philippines. Congressman Filner recounted his long interest in the situation of Filipino veterans who had fought with U.S. forces during W.W. II. In a subsequent exchange with a television journalist attending the call

on the Speaker, Congressman Filner explained his hope that immigration legislation would help to address family reunification issues affecting veterans. He explained his interest in promoting training for Philippine nurses in the U.S. in a manner that would not lead to a "brain drain" from the Philippines. Congressman Filner also said that the Philippines was a natural partner of the U.S. on counterterrorism, and that he was confident there would be a clean Philippine election and a peaceful transfer of power in mid-2010. CODEL Filner then proceeded to a larger room for brief remarks and mingling with Filipino veterans and members of Congress.

Under Secretary Santos

17. (SBU) Under Secretary of National Defense Antonio C. Santos received Rep. Filner in the wake of the recent Maguindanao massacre, which required the attention of the Acting Secretary for National Defense Gonzales. The brief meeting was dominated by discussions of the events in Maguindanao and USEC Santos thanked Rep Filner for all he has done for Filipino W.W.II Veterans, noting his father was a veteran of that war. A briefing presented by Under Secretary for Veterans and Civil Affairs Carolina followed the courtesy call. The presentation highlighted U.S. assistance and described at length the ongoing Philippine Defense Reform initiative of the two governments that has helped transform the Armed Forces of the Philippines into a more transparent, accountable, and effective partner in counterterrorism and regional security. Now in its final year, PDR has resulted in important reforms, Carolina asserted.

Visit to Zamboanga

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18. (U) The Ambassador accompanied Rep. Filner during a Thanksgiving Day visit to Zamboanga City, highlighted by a courtesy call on Mayor Celso Lobregat, Thanksgiving lunch with visiting U.S. troops, and a visit to the USAID book warehouse. Mayor Lobregat thanked the Congressman for all he has done for Philippine-U.S. relations and provided a brief presentation about the city of Zamboanga, emphasizing the city's strategic location as hub for regional commerce. The Ambassador remarked on her fondness for the city and reminded those in attendance of her status as honorary daughter of the city, prompting the mayor to thank the Ambassador for spending yet another Thanksgiving in his city. Rep. Filner and the Ambassador then served Thanksgiving lunch to members of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) who provided a briefing on JSOTF-P after dining with a number of task force members from his district. Before departing Zamboanga, Rep. Filner visited the USAID book warehouse, home to hundreds of thousands of schoolbooks that will eventually be distributed throughout the Philippines via a unique educator voucher program. Numerous warehouse employees had just returned from the remote islands of Tawi Tawi, where 90,000 books had recently been distributed.

Visit with American Studies Students

19. (U) Returning to his college professorial roots, Rep. Filner met with a large gathering of American Studies students at De La Salle University in Metro Manila to discuss the issues of the day and his perspective as a sitting Congressman. The open dialogue and question and answer format provided stimulating, two-way discussion regarding topics ranging from the U.S. role in climate change, the worldwide economy and recovery efforts, campaign finance reform, and the healthcare debate in the U.S. At one point Rep. Filner took to the white board to explain and illustrate what he termed "the undemocratic practice of re-districting," complete with a history of gerrymandering.

Memorial events and outreach

10. (U) Rep. Filner laid a wreath at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial, which commemorates more than 50,000 U.S. military

deaths in World War II, and he paid a visit to the Corregidor Memorial, which immortalizes the brave Filipino and American service members who fought shoulder to shoulder during World War II.

¶11. (U) The Congressman ate lunch with the Marine Security Guard detachment at the U.S. Embassy, toured the Manila VA facilities, and met with over 150 VA employees, the majority of whom are Filipino citizens. He thanked the staff for their dedication and commitment to serving veterans and for carrying out the mission of the USDVA in the Philippines. He separately visited the Philippine Government's Veterans Memorial Medical Center, a recipient of the VA grant funds.

¶12. (U) Rep. Filner was provided an in-depth briefing on VA Manila's implementation of the Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation provision, passed with his efforts as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The Congressman thanked those VA employees in attendance for acting so quickly to implement the legislation and complimented VA Manila on the progress made thus far, with over 10,000 veterans having received over \$125 million since the bill's passage in February. The briefing concluded with a slideshow presentation of photos and news footage from the Philippines during the first few weeks after the law passed. Visibly moved by the presentation, the Congressman thanked the VA Manila staff again and asked for a copy of the slideshow to share with VA stakeholders and others in Washington.

¶13. (U) The Philippine Veterans Affairs Office honored the Congressman with a lunch reception, where Rep. Filner was able to meet with scores of proud Filipino World War II veterans and leaders of the major Veterans Service Organizations in the Philippines, many of whom are recipients of the new benefit. He presented several eligible Veterans with their lump sum check for the new benefit.

¶14. (U) Congressman Filner joined 18 others from around the globe as a 2009 Gusi International Peace Prize recipient. Billed by its organizers as the Asian version of the Nobel, the Gusi seeks to "recognize individuals working toward the attainment of peace and respect for human life and dignity."

Comment

¶15. (U) Rep. Filner's visit successfully underlined the close and long-standing nature of the U.S.-Philippine partnership and our shared commitment to our veterans. His visit received favorable coverage in the local media, and generated considerable additional goodwill, particularly in the politically influential veterans' community here.

¶16. (U) Representative Filner did not have an opportunity to clear

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this cable before departure.

KENNEY